

An Elusive Controversy: the Beginnings of Polemics Against the Stage in France

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It is generally acknowledged that writings against the theater appeared much later in France than in England—where the first pamphlets date from the 1570s—and even much later than in Italy and Spain. In France, three successive periods of writing against the theater are usually identified: the 1630s, the 1660s and the 1690s.¹

The first period is linked to the Cardinal Richelieu, who is personally an ardent supporter of the theater but who is essentially interested in its political usefulness. In 1641 he has Louis XIII promulgate a decree that, while it condemns scandalous spectacles, affirms that the theater is not, in itself, the source of the crimes imputed to it.² The second period largely centers on Molière, who challenges the critics and, in response, is the main target of his enemies' attacks: this is the period of the important trea-

1. For more information on the periodization of the debate in France, see Blocker and Thirouin.

2. This decree is analyzed by Blocker, chapter 4. The text has often been reprinted; see François-André Isambert, *Recueil général des anciennes lois françaises*, t. XVI, Paris, 1829, No. 346, "Déclaration sur la profession des comédiens qui leur défend les paroles lascives et déshonnêtes [Declaration on the profession of actors, forbidding them to use lascivious and lewd speech]. Saint-Germain en Laye, 16 avril 1641; reg. auParl. le 24 (vol. GGG f^o. 234)", p. 536-37.

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tises of Pierre Nicole, of the Prince of Conti, of the abbé d'Aubignac, and of Father Voisin.³ The last crisis began when the Theatine Father Caffaro stated, in answer to a question by the playwright Edme Boursault, that the Church had never condemned the theater. His letter, published by Boursault, raised such an outcry that he was forced to withdraw his statement. He was reprimanded by Bossuet, who launched a very violent denunciation of the theater, which was followed by a wave of pamphlets emanating from the clergy.⁴

It is not the aim of this article to revisit these successive crises but to look instead into the beginnings of the controversy. The situation in France is very different from that of England in the last quarter of the sixteenth century: rather than a frontal assault, the attacks in France were occasional and rare. The first published treatise is a *Traité des jeux comiques et tragiques. Contenant instruction, et resolution de la question: Assavoir, si tels esbats, et passe temps sont permis aux chrestiens* [*Treatise of Comic and Tragic Games, Which Treats and Resolves the Question Whether Entertainments and Pastimes are Permitted to Christians*] (Sedan, 1600), published under the initials D.T.⁵ It provoked a reaction: in *La Première Atteinte contre ceux qui accusent les Comédies, par une Demoiselle Française* [*First Blast Against Those Who Accuse Comedies, By a French Lady*] (Paris, 1603), Mademoiselle de Beaulieu attacks a volume “printed in Germany” that “accuses Catholics” of an idolatrous tendency leading to an unworthy love of the theater. Even though Mlle de Beaulieu’s brochure was reprinted in 1609, these two publications did not create any stir. The first anti-theatrical pamphlet to be really noticed comes much later. André Rivet, a Calvinist minister from La Rochelle living in Holland, published in The Hague in 1639, the *Instruc-*

3. For bibliographical details, consult the online bibliography on the site of the project “Hatred of the Stage” (*Haine du théâtre*) directed by Clotilde Thouret and myself, in the framework of LabexOBVIL. <http://obvil.paris-sorbonne.fr/projets/la-haine-du-theatre>

4. Bossuet published his *Maximes et réflexions sur la Comédie* in Paris in 1694. This volume was followed, in the same year, by those of Pierre Coustel, Jean Gerbais, Charles de La Grange, Pierre Le Brun, Henri Lelevel, and Laurent Pégurier, all published in Paris.

5. All translations in this article are my own. The volume is mentioned by Mlle de Beaulieu, without any name or title. I thank Marie-Thérèse Mourey who has just identified it and found a copy at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel. The volume is of the utmost rarity. The Wolfenbüttel copy is the only one so far localized. On it, an anonymous hand of the seventeenth century has identified D. T. as Daniel Tilenus, a Silesian Parson who lived in France from around 1590 and who was called to Sedan in 1599 to teach theology. From what I know of Tilenus, this attribution is convincing.

tion chrestienne touchant les spectacles publics des Comoedies et Tragoedies, où est décidée la question, s'ilz doibvent estre permis par le Magistrat, et si les enfans de Dieu y peuvent assister en bonne conscience [*Christian Instruction Concerning Public Spectacles of Comedies and Tragedies, Where the Question is Solved Whether They Must Be Allowed By the Magistrate and Whether the Children of God May Attend Them in all Good Conscience*].⁶ He was followed by another minister from La Rochelle, Philippe Vincent, who published a *Traitté des Theatres* in La Rochelle in 1647. Prior to that, just a few polemical pamphlets related to certain local events appeared, which I will discuss later. On the other side, there were Richelieu, Georges de Scudéry's *Apologie du theater* [*Defense of the Theater*], published in Paris in 1639 and probably instigated by Richelieu, and the royal decree of 1641 inspired by Richelieu. One cannot really speak of a "crisis" because the adversaries do not address each other directly. Because of the publication dates, it was thought that Scudéry's work was a response to that of Rivet, but in fact it was not.⁷ Moreover, the debate began much earlier than these few publications would suggest, but it is hard to find its traces, for reasons that I shall try to elucidate.

The Controversy Before the Polemics

The traces of debate are faint, and they are only the tip of the iceberg. For several reasons, the conditions are already ripe for fully fledged polemics in the mid sixteenth century. The first reason is sociological: the professionalization of the theater, which occurs in two stages. First, theatrical performances become commercially profitable. The "Confrérie de la Passion" (a group of non-professional actors who occasionally perform mystery plays in Paris) organizes performances that become longer and longer and more and more costly and spectacular. Next, amateurs give way to the first professional theater companies.⁸ The establishment of the theater as a commercial enterprise led by professionals not only results in socio-economic upheavals, it also raises ideological issues; the appearance of professional actors throws new light on criticisms that date back to antiq-

6. On this treatise, see Floris, chapters 7 and 8. A polemical debate followed, between Rivet and a French actor based in Holland, Antoine de La Barre. The two pamphlets are reproduced by Floris. It was not, as is currently believed, related to G. de Scudéry's *Apologie du théâtre* (1639). Scudéry does not try to answer Rivet, of whom he was unaware; his only aim was to serve Richelieu's policy in favor of the theater.

7. Rivet's treatise is determined by the Dutch context. See Floris, chapters 7 and 8.

8. The first professional companies were active in Italy in the 1540s. In France, they appeared later. See Desprez.

uity. With these economic changes, a number of old arguments against the stage came to be seen in a new light.

There is, first of all, the series of patristic treatises that is brought to light as a result of the intense search for early texts provoked by the wars of religion. The adversaries during these wars had already studied closely the history of the Church, the decisions of the Councils and the writings of the Fathers of the Church to glean arguments related to the disputed issues (images in particular). In doing so, they unearthed diatribes condemning theatrical representations, in which circuses were condemned even more often than the stage. The Church Fathers highlighted the moral issues (for example, Saint Augustine denounces the deleterious effects of theatrical representations on the passions) and the dangers of paganism (the theater insidiously turns Christians away from concern with their salvation, if it does not turn them back into worshippers of idols). These texts were already known, of course, but as actors became professionals, this largely abstract condemnation took on new life. The adversaries of the theater (the *theatrophobes*) invoke the Fathers of the Church, and in particular Saint Augustine (*The Confessions*, *De divination daemonum*), Tertullian (*De Spectaculis*), Saint Cyprian of Carthage (*De Spectaculis*, *Ad Donatum*), and Salvianus of Marseille (*De Gubernatione Dei*, Book 6).⁹ The first French *theatrophobic* treatise, by Daniel Tilenus, mentions them and quotes them abundantly. But *theatrophobes* do not simply mention them in passing: André Rivet ends his pamphlet with a translation of Salvianus.¹⁰ Their exploration also extends to the Councils and the decisions of the Church. The first *theatrophilic* treatise, by Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, skims the Councils and Gratian's *Decretum* to justify decent entertainment.¹¹

Earlier traditions dating from antiquity are also brought to bear. First came Plato's condemnation of the theater as an art of falsehood. Second, the denunciation of actors as immoral: in Rome they were reviled as much as they were idolized (Dupont, part 1, chapter 4). Actors lead dissolute lives and make public exhibits of themselves, for money and for the pleasure of their audience; this is an activity clearly similar to prostitution. The infamy of actors, a commonplace in antiquity, was carried forward by late pagan

9. As the prospection goes on, many others will emerge, such as Prudentius's *Against Symmachus* or Saint Ambrose's *Sermons*.

10. At the end of his treatise (*op. cit.*, p. 96-131), Rivet gives a new translation of a good part of Book 6 of *De Gubernatione Dei* (it had already been translated in full by N. de Beaufremont, Paris, 1575).

11. Beaulieu, *op. cit.*, f. 5-7. She quotes also Tertullian and Saint Augustine, as well as a few minor Fathers of the Church (such as Prudentius, Pelagius, Saint Ambrose, Maximus, etc.).

authors such as Gellius (*Attic Nights*, Book XX, § 4) and subsequently the Church Fathers.

The condemnation of the stage also finds its place in political theory. In treatises on matters of State, the theater is commonly included among the causes of public disturbances, because it is a source of danger to the peace and to decency of manners. To measure the effects of the change in climate caused by the professionalization of the theater, it is enough to compare two treatises published a century apart. The *De Institutione reipublicae libri novem* [*Nine Books of the Republic*] by Francesco Patrizi da Siena (d. 1492) has a chapter on poets (Book II, chapter 6) that allows the learned to read tragedies but refuses their performance because the audience would become desperate or mad and men would become effeminate. His chapter on the establishment of theaters (Book VIII, chapter 14) gives them short shrift. As the need to ensure the protection of decency and religion has banished farces, tragedies and comedies, theaters are no longer built and the old ones have fallen into ruin.¹² For a fifteenth-century intellectual, the idea that the theater is harmful is a given, but it is purely theoretical: in practice the question does not arise.¹³ A century later, Jean Bodin's *Les six livres de la République* [*The Six Books of the Republic*] (Paris, 1576) hits a very different note. In a chapter on censorship (Book VI, chapter 1) Bodin reviles actors and the stage, deeming theater one of the "Republic's most pernicious plagues imaginable" (611).¹⁴ Between the two treatises, the status of the theater has changed completely: from a theoretical menace it has become a real danger, for actors are no longer scarecrows to frighten children but the living incarnation of the lure of the flesh.

The condemnation of the theater also takes its place in the more recent tradition of demonology, which began to take shape in the early fourteenth century. In sixteenth-century France, it is in the treatises on demonology that the condemnation of the theater is most evident. Pierre Massé devotes a chapter of his treatise, *De l'imposture et tromperie des Diables, Devins, Enchanteurs, Sorciers, Nouveurs d'esguillettes, Chevilleurs, Necromanciens, Chiromanciens et autres qui par telle invocation Diabolique, arts Magiques & Superstitions abusent le peuple* [*Of the Trickery and Deception of Devils,*

12. The oldest edition I am aware of is that of Paris, 1518. The text was extensively published in France, where it was translated three times in the sixteenth century, by an anonymous translator in 1520, by J. Le Blond in 1584, and by J. Tigeou in 1589. In this last edition, the two passages are f. 123-24v and 508.

13. This is of course inaccurate, since humanist tragedy had already appeared in Italy, but it was still little known and a kind of game for the learned.

14. "...peste de la République des plus pernicieuses qu'on saurait imaginer."

Soothsayers, Enchanters, Witchmongers, Senders of Magical Ligatures,¹⁵ *Sorcerers, Necromancers, Palmists and Others Who, by Such Diabolical Invocation, Magical Arts and Superstitions Deceive the People*] (1579), to the subject. In “Des jeux & autres observations seculieres retenues de l’ancien paganism” [Of games and other profane practices retained from ancient paganism] (Book I, chapter 22, f. 10-107v) he accuses carnivals, masquerades, dances, and plays of encouraging debauchery and turning the faithful away from acts of piety.

René Benoît takes a similar stance in his *Petit fragment catechistic d’une plus ample catechese de la Magie reprehensible & des Magiciens* [Little Fragment of an Ampler Catechistic Exposition of Unlawful Magic and Magicians] (1579), in a chapter explicitly entitled: “Que les jeux des theatres & les dances sont une suite de la science diabolique, operante par philaptie & amour de soy mesme contraire à la foy operante par charité, fondement de la Cité de Dieu” [That plays and dances are a consequence of the science of the devil, which operates through self-love in contrast to faith which operates through charity, the foundation of the City of God] (chapter 16, pp. 20-22). The demonization of the theater is the logical consequence of its pagan origin. Since the time of the Church Fathers, the theater was viewed simply as a way to maintain the people under the domination of idols. And who, besides the devil, would lurk in performances that seek to lead Christians away from their rightful path and return them to paganism?

The condemnation of the theater thus has a sufficiently long history to have found its place in a broad array of texts, both profane and religious, both popular and learned. Polemics were reinvigorated at a time when theater performances drew large crowds and engendered as much distrust as enthusiasm.

The Legal Conflict

How does the controversy manifest itself before it is enshrined in pamphlets? Essentially in two ways: conflicts that oppose the civil or religious authorities and the producers of theatrical performances, and a simmering conflict between actors and preachers.

An important element of these conflicts is, as I have said, the professionalization that gave renewed impetus to the accusations of immorality and infamy that were launched since antiquity. Yet the most important element is different: it is, even before the theater became professionalized, the theater’s clear establishment as a lucrative enterprise in its own right.

15. “Nouveurs d’aiguillettes” are sorcerers who induce impotence by magical means. Cotgrave 1611, (s.v.), explains the phrase but does not give an English equivalent.

This economic aspect plays an important role in the polemics against the stage, especially in England. It is particularly clear in France at an early date, when the performance of mystery plays is no longer a pious activity undertaken by amateurs but a business. In Paris, the Confrérie de la Passion had a monopoly on the representation of mystery plays, which was awarded in 1402 by Charles VI and regularly reaffirmed by his successors.¹⁶ In the 1530s, the Confrérie's performances were spectacular and costly; they caused disturbances and generally disrupted urban life. This led to an open conflict at the Paris Parliament in December 1541 and January 1542.¹⁷

In 1540-41, the Confrérie presented the *Actes des Apôtres* [*Mystery Play of The Acts of the Apostles*] and Francis I, who had attended the preceding play (the *Mystère de la Passion* in 1539), gave his approval and showed his interest. As a result, the producers requested from the king a building specifically conceived for their performances. In December 1541, the Deputy Crown Prosecutor (*substitut du Procureur du roi*) made a speech aimed at banning the performance of the *Mystère du Vieux Testament* [*Mystery of the Old Testament*], which the Confrérie had begun to prepare. In order to seem as learned as he was vehement, the Prosecutor ran through the catalogue of the main arguments that would be repeated over the next three centuries: the condemnation of the Church Fathers; the waste of time and public money; the confusion between the sacred and the profane time (and the confusion between entertainment and church services); the mix of sacred and profane themes on the stage; and the shamelessness of actors. He emphasized the profits of the producers to the detriment of the poor and the decline in the level of alms (he calculated that the sum foregone amounted to 3,000 pounds). He noted the effects on people's behavior (priests rush through the mass, artisans leave their shops and drink in the taverns to such a degree that their children lack bread), the disturbance of the peace (with the risk of further tumult), and the menace of heresy (if all of the Holy Bible is available to the people, this will encourage the Reformation). In sum, the theater is the source of all types of ills: moral, religious, social, economic, and political.

The lawyer of the producers responded by cleverly invoking the king, who approved the *Mystère de la passion* [*Mystery Play of the Passion*] and

16. See de La Mare, Vol. 1, Book I, sec. III, "Des Spectacles," p. 433-45. Charles VI's letters patent are reproduced p. 437-38, followed by others published by his successors. Runnells, 2004, also published many documents.

17. See Runnalls, 2004, document No. 17, p. 167-81, and Floris, 2008, Chapter 5. I further analyzed this case at the conference "Hatred of the Stage: Debates and Polemics (Antiquity to the 19th c.)," Paris-Sorbonne, 23-25 October 2014.

found the *Actes des Apôtres* [*Acts of the Apostles*] of interest. He drew attention to the heavy expenses engaged for the new play and accepted the principle of the producers' contribution to the poor. The Parliament asked the producers for an account of 800 pounds and suspended the preparation of the performance but put off a final decision until the king had stated his position. A few days later, the king authorized the performance by letters patent, and a month later, on January 25, 1542, the Parliament canceled its suspension. Nonetheless, it imposed some restrictions: it limited the price of tickets (which had risen from year to year) and imposed a kind of tax, by requiring a contribution of 1,000 pounds from the producers, which could be increased, depending on the sums collected. This was the first instance of a curious French practice, the "*droit des pauvres*", which from 1699 to 1942 will oblige theater companies to pay a tax, as if the theater, alone among all of the forms of entertainment, was responsible for the low level of charitable contributions.

Clearly, everything that would be found in the later public arguments was already in place. The stakes were complex and interlaced. There are the moral and theological arguments for which the prosecutor drew on antiquarian knowledge. Economic arguments clearly play an essential role: the prosecutor insists on the excessive price of tickets and the disruption of productive economic activity and claims that merchants and artisans become lazy and ruin their families in the taverns. And, last but not least, there are the political arguments: the theater disturbs the peace, with bouts of drunkenness that lead to disorder and sedition. Here, then, are found the different threads of arguments that were previously dispersed in very disparate publications. In the prosecutor's speech, the description of the deleterious effects of plays is, probably involuntarily, grotesquely Rabelaisian, with the priest rushing through the mass to get quickly to the theater. More importantly, the affair suggests muted but strong differences of opinion among the different authorities. The king was clearly favorable—he attended an earlier performance, he approved the next, and he tipped the scales. Leading aristocrats requested exceptional performances,¹⁸ and a part of the royal administration supported the Confrérie. To say nothing of the public that ensured the success of these performances in spite of the high price of the tickets. Yet another part of the royal administration made things difficult for the producers, and the majority of the Parliament was hostile. The initial judgment was markedly negative, but the king's opinion,

18. On June 13, 1542, the duke of Vendôme asked for a private performance of the *Mystère de l'Ancien Testament* and the Parliament ordered the Confrérie to play for him; see Runnalls 184.

invoked at an appropriate time by the lawyer for the defense, made the difference.

The situation in Paris in 1541 is not without parallels with the early days of the controversy in England. In London, there were frictions between the municipal authorities and leading aristocrats (who protect the theater companies) as well as economic tensions,¹⁹ with the borders blurred between theological-moral and economic arguments. The theater was accused at the same time of turning the faithful away from concern with their salvation and of engaging in unfair competition with sermons by emptying the churches to fill the theaters.

The War of the Pulpit and the Trestles

Even before the publication of the first polemical treatises, the conflict was present and attested in the decisions of the civil and religious authorities.²⁰ It had remained hidden because it was not disseminated in print. While there were a few written traces, they were dispersed in varied writings, such as treatises on demonology and political pamphlets. The controversy existed, but it was largely carried out in oral form. The decisions of the authorities bear witness to the persistence of this undocumented dispute: if kings and parliaments intervene, it is because a crisis must be resolved, and in these repeated crises, the main protagonists are the preachers and the actors. Of this there are three eloquent accounts. The first is that of a member of the Ligue, Nicolas Rolland du Plessis, who published in 1588, in Paris, the *Remonstrances tres-humbles au roy de France & de Pologne Henry troisieme de ce nom* [*Most Humble Remonstrance to the King of France and Poland, Henry III*], in which he rails against the Reformists and bewails the state of the kingdom. He runs through all of the transgressions against the ten commandments and takes aim at the theater when he reaches the second. He denounces the lack of piety of a brotherhood (which remains nameless but is clearly the Confrérie), which spends money that should be used to feed the poor. The king has given them permission to continue to perform at the Hotel de Bourgogne, and “in spite of the universal condemnation of all of the preachers of Paris, who continue to complain daily in vain, having only obtained a halt to performances for a year, which then begin again more numerous than before” (Rolland Du Plessis 131-32).²¹

19. On these tensions, see Spina part II.

20. On church decisions, see Floris, 2008, Chapter 1; Dubu, 1997; Reyff, 1998, Chapter 1; and Zinguer, 2004.

21. “...nonobstant la clameur universelle de tous les predicateurs de Paris, lesquels continuent encores journellement de s'en plaindre, mais en vain, n'ayant peu pour

These preachers, whom du Plessis admires and whose complaints rarely receive satisfaction, are clearly Catholics.

A few years later, the preachers were on the other side. Daniel Tilenus, who publishes the first *theatrophobic* treatise, is a Calvinist parson who teaches theology at the Collège de Sedan. André Rivet, who publishes the second treatise, explains its origin in his preface, "To the Christian reader." As a professor of theology at the Academy of Leyden, he had treated, eight years earlier (in 1631), the third commandment of the second table, on lust and defilement of the flesh and all that can lead to it. He had therefore spoken about public games and entertainments and about comedies and tragedies in which "all kinds of vile passions" are represented. Since that time, he has seen that in the city in which he lives (The Hague) actors are invited,²² and even some ministers approve of this. This determined him to put into French what he taught future ministers in Latin. He wished to reach a broader audience so as to lead those who had gone astray, allowing themselves to be persuaded that these depraved entertainments were innocent, back into the fold. Rivet's explanations make it clear that the issue is a political one: the theater is all the more dangerous when it is under the protection of the authorities. And, in the 1630s, the Cardinal Richelieu, the Prince of Orange, and Pope Urban VIII all viewed the theater in a positive light. His explanation also proves that it is not just a few preachers that inveigh against public entertainment. The Calvinists manifestly consider the condemnation of the theater useful, if not necessary, to the training of their ministers. One sees why: taking up arms against the theater is an excellent way to exercise control over the daily lives of the faithful and to keep them on the straight and narrow. Hence the "orthopedic" intent: it is necessary to make the faithful scrupulous and vigilant by destroying their naïve trust. Denouncing evil where the faithful see only an innocent pastime is a means of reinforcing one's hold over their souls. There is in this an echo of the "pastoral of fear" analyzed by Jean Delumeau: teaching to see evil everywhere, even where it appears benign.

The third *theatrophobic* treatise, by Philippe Vincent, takes the same path; Vincent also explains the source of his work in a preface.²³ Having

tout obtenir sinon une deffense de jouer durant une année, pour recommencer au bout de l'an plus que devant." The Confrérie bought the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1548 but only played there occasionally, and rented it to professional companies.

22. All quotations come from this unnumbered preface. The treatise was aimed at Frederick-Henry Prince of Orange who protected a French company that he had called to present the festivities of his sister-in-law's wedding, in 1638. See Floris, p. 213, and Fransen, pp. 68-73.

23. *Op. cit.*, "Advertissement au Lecteur," unnumbered.

learned rather late about Rivet's treatise, he was ready to cancel his plan to publish, but decided to go ahead because of the "apologists" of the theater (i.e., Scudery) and because it was rumored that the ministers of the Reformed Church in Paris placed the theater among the *adiaphora*—things that are not a matter of faith and for which the faithful are free to choose. He therefore wrote to his Paris colleagues, who reassured him that they condemned the theater from the pulpit daily. The situation clearly was that, because Richelieu protected and encouraged the theater, there was a strong temptation, even among the guardians of the temple, to look benevolently on these entertainments. The rumor of widespread tolerance among the protectors of public morals provoked a need for the protestant to react. Moreover, there is the value of taking a hard line: not only does this serve as an example to the faithful, it also clearly shows the difference with Catholicism. The theater offers an opportunity, and the preachers hammer out their condemnation every day. It is not surprising that, in Vincent's work as in Rivet's, they turn their wrath on the rival church, denounced as intrinsically perverted by the sense of spectacle.

Who stands up to the preachers? Until Scudery's *Apologie* (1639), the only defense of the theater was Mademoiselle de Beaulieu's pamphlet. Although it was reissued in 1609, it went unnoticed, and there is no mention of it anywhere.²⁴ The defense of the theater is not to be found in treatises but is essentially ensured by actors and playwrights. It is found, first, in prologues, that is, in the largely autonomous preambles that serve less to introduce a play than to capture the attention of a generally restless public. Those of Bruscamille were so successful that he published them in various collections. He devoted a half dozen to the defense of his art,²⁵ always attacking an adversary whom he never names—"they," "our censors," "our detractors," "the scum of the people," "the daring," "scandalmongers"—either because the slanderers blend into the landscape or because he chooses not to name them for fear of alienating the Church as a whole. Bruscamille does not simply complain about enemies that are as ignorant as they are slanderous, he lists their arguments in several of his prologues.²⁶ He even develops a full catalogue of arguments and responses in a prologue entitled "En faveur de la comedie" [In favor of the stage] (No. 78, 455-58).

24. I have not been able to consult the second edition, which does not necessarily prove that the book was successful. Booksellers often pasted a new title page on unsold copies, in order to give the work an appearance of success and novelty.

25. Bruscamille had his prologues collected and published from 1609. My references are to his *Œuvres complètes* (2012).

26. See in particular "Les Pitagoriens" ["The Pythagoreans"] (No. 59, 386-89) and "Du loisir" ["On Leisure"] (No. 67, p. 417-19).

In it, the controversy is out in the open, as Bruscombille runs through the accusations and the responses, probably arranging the enemy's arguments somewhat, according to an elementary rule of pamphlets, in order to deal with them more easily.

The case of Bruscombille is exceptional: of the other prologues, almost nothing remains. Yet, there is one, of which two manuscripts exist, and which was then published in the nineteenth century. It was pronounced in Bourges in 1607 by the actor Mathieu Lefebvre de La Porte, in response to a Jesuit: *Prologue de La Porte, comédien, Prononcé à Bourges, le 9 de sept. mil six cent sept, contre les Jésuites qui le vouloient empêcher de jouer sur peine d'excommunication à tous ceux qui iraient* [Prologue, by La Porte, Actor, Delivered at Bourges, on September 9 1607 Against the Jesuits Who Wanted to Prevent the Play by Threatening to Excommunicate All Those Who Attended].²⁷ The prologue is a small polemical treatise in its own right, as it responds in turn to three different types of arguments: theological (the theater is spiritual leprosy), moral (actors are shameless because they ask for payment), and political (the theater is a seditious activity). He also adds a list of *theatrophilic* authorities (Saint Thomas, Saint Antonin, etc.).²⁸ What is especially noteworthy about this prologue is the veiled violence of its *ad hominem* responses to the Jesuits, who had been exiled from France in 1594 and only recently allowed back (1603). If the theater is like leprosy, why do the Jesuits use it in their schools? How can they reproach actors for being paid, when they extort huge contributions for their school performances?²⁹ He even goes so far as a spiteful allusion, turning the Jesuits' accusations back against them. He implies that they have no political lessons to give when they tax the theater with being seditious, since they themselves engage in sedition. It is a clear allusion to their expulsion after their pupil Jean Chatel's assassination attempt on Henri IV. The prologue ends with a veiled threat: the actors will find defenders to reject the slander of the Jesuits.

This is a good example of a conflict that remains muted in two ways. First, it can only be observed through partial traces: we have the response,

27. It was published by Boyer in 1892. The text is online at Wikisource. On this prologue, see Desprez.

28. As Desprez, 2009, has shown, these references are borrowed from an Italian pamphlet, *Trattatosopr al'arte comic acavatodell'opere di S. Tommaso* [Treatise on the Art of Comedy Excerpted From the Works of St Thomas], published in Lyon in 1601, under the name of P.M. Cecchini. It was later published several times under other names.

29. The Jesuits seem to have asked parents to contribute to school performances, the contribution varying according to the importance of the role played by each pupil.

but not the attack (as was also the case for the first defense published in French: Mademoiselle de Beaulieu says she responds to a German Calvinist who had remained unidentified until now). Second, the conflict is fraught with innuendo: the dispute shifts from the ethico-theological to the political, and from the legitimacy of the theater to that of the hidden state within the State that is the Society of Jesus.

The prologues are not alone in responding to the adversaries of the theater. There are also the “comédies des comédiens.” They enter the controversy in two ways: by presenting on the stage an explicit debate on the merits of the theater or by making the play’s plot an illustration of the dispute. Gougenot’s *La comédie des comédiens* [*The Comedy of Actors*] (1633) organizes a debate to refute the arguments of a “melancholy philosopher,” which are taken up and refuted one by one.³⁰ This debate is only a part of the defense, as the first two acts constitute a living vindication of the theater. They show how Bellerose, the head of the theater company of the Hotel de Bourgogne, resolves a quarrel between two bourgeois—a lawyer and a merchant—each of whom claims that his profession is much more dignified than that of the other. Bellerose helps them reach an agreement by having them enter his theater company, as the profession of actor has an advantage over every other, in that it can embrace, depending on the role played, all professions. As the two acts unfold, the audience sees everyone—masters and servants, men and women—embrace such a glorious, pleasing and useful profession. At the same time, an uncle in search of his nephew is at first shocked to learn that he has become an actor, but is soon appeased by his contact with the company, loses his narrow bourgeois prejudices, and agrees that the theater is a respectable profession, one which the son of a good family can follow without hesitation.

The play thus presents a defense of the theater that varies in both its form and its aim. It can at the same time present on the stage an abstract debate, peppered with theoretical arguments, and give a concrete illustration by means of a plot that demonstrates the degree to which the theater is socially enviable and politically useful. In doing so, the play defends several ideas: there is nothing shameful about the acting profession, on the contrary it rightly attracts respectable bourgeois citizens;³¹ the theater plays a socially useful role, it does not simply entertain but, in calming the pas-

30. This debate occurs at the end of act 2, p. 83-91, i.e., when the actors get ready to play the “play within the play” that occupies the last three acts.

31. Soon afterwards, Corneille will phrase a similar apology by proclaiming that “Le théâtre est un fief dont les rentes sont bonnes” [the theater is a fief that produces good income] (*L'illusion comique*, éd. 1639, 5.6.1802).

sions, it can restore social harmony, as the head of the company shows by reconciling two friends who are about to come to blows.

Before 1639, very few treatises specifically against the stage were published in France: apart from that of Tilenus in 1600, only a brief pamphlet, very limited and local in scope, was launched in 1607 by an anonymous Calvinist against a performance at the college of the Jesuits in Lyon.³² Nevertheless, a polemical debate had been going on for decades, through sermons and prologues. It is hardly visible today, because only a minor part took printed form. It is all the more difficult to observe because it is unstable: the lines of conflict shift and the opponents change positions. In Bourges, an actor confronts a Jesuit who tries to dissuade people from attending the performances of a brilliant theatrical season.³³ But in Lyon, in the same year, the roles are reversed: a Jesuit defends a school performance against a Calvinist. There is not even a clear division between Catholics and Protestants. In 1588, the hostile preachers mentioned by Rolland du Plessis are Catholic, those mentioned by Rivet and Vincent, in 1639 and 1647, are Calvinists.

If the moral and theological arguments are always emphasized, the debate is, in fact, astonishingly variable, because several conflicts are intertwined: there is a religious battle and a conflict between preachers and actors, with economic as well as ideological interests at stake. The debates about the stage were obviously turned to other objectives. In England, the attacks against the theater took, from the outset, an anti-papist turn.³⁴ In France, the Calvinists Rivet and Vincent aim explicitly at the theatricality of Catholic ceremonies.³⁵ They attack the stage in order to accuse the

32. *Récit touchant la Comedie jouée par les Jésuites et leurs disciples en la ville de Lyon au mois d'aoust de l'an 1607* [Narrative on the Comedy Played by the Jesuits and their Disciples in the Town of Lyon, in August 1607], s.l., 1607. A Jesuit, André de Gaule, replies in his *Conviction véritable du récit fabuleux divulgué touchant la Représentation exhibée en face de toute la ville de Lyon, au collège de la Compagnie de Jésus, le 7. d'Aoust, de la présente année 1607* [Rectification of the Fabulous Tale Divulged Concerning the Performance Given to the Whole Town of Lyon, in the College of the Society of Jesus on 7 August of the Present Year 1607], Lyon, 1607. The affair was analyzed and the texts published by Floris, chapter 6. Strangely enough, the attack was published with an English translation in London: *The Jesuites comedie. Acted at Lyons in France, the seaventh and eight dayes of August last past 1067* [sic], London: E. Allde and A. Johnson, 1607.

33. In his diary, William Drummond of Hawthornden gives a useful account. See MacDonald, 1970. This part of the diary should be published soon by a team led by Michael Meere.

34. For more information on the English context, see Barish; also see Heineman.

35. Tilenus does not make the same point.

Church of Rome of idolatry, to denounce a cult that makes extensive use of spectacular effects and invests in make-believe and appearances instead of strengthening piety. This attack is fairly understandable at a time when Pope Urban VIII favors the theater to the same extent as Richelieu. The situation will change radically in the second half of the century, when the attacks will be led by the *dévots* (the Prince of Conti), the Jansenists (Pierre Nicole), and the Gallican clergy (Bossuet).

One may think that this use of the controversy surrounding the theater to religious ends is related to the effects of the Edict of Nantes. The *Edit de pacification* of 1598 enjoined everyone to forget what had taken place, in order to end, once and for all, public disturbances. To those who were unable to forget, the theater could offer a means to continue the battle more discreetly. But this is not enough to explain the aptitude of the debate to go on for decades, to resurface constantly, and to respond to changing circumstances. Even if the theological and moral questions had been in the spotlight ever since the Fathers of the Church, even if the risk of idolatry and the danger of unhealthy passions were always underlined, the religious conflict was not the only issue. The success of these debates, over the centuries, is due, first, to their adaptability: they can be adjusted to deal with a wide variety of questions, with economic and political as well as religious stakes. It is also due to the public nature of theatrical performances: the stage is an ideal sounding board. Performances attract attention, draw crowds and regularly create public disturbances, which the authorities try to repress. To no avail, apparently, since the decrees had to be constantly renewed in France, from 1541, when the Parliament of Paris complained of rowdy crowds, to the reign of Louis XIV, when several decrees were promulgated against violent dealings around the theaters.³⁶ Before they reached the printing press, debates about the theater had a long oral prehistory. But even after that, they continued to have a partly hidden existence, as the theological and moral arguments that had apparently remained unchanged since the time of the Church Fathers often concealed new objectives.

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36. The decree of 9 January 1673 even mentions troublemakers who try to start fires and attack people, see N. de La Mare (442).

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